

Enhancing Proficiency Level Using Digital Video

Noriko Fujioka-Ito

University of Cincinnati

January 19, 2009

Enhancing Proficiency Level Using Digital Video

Noriko Fujioka-Ito

University of Cincinnati

Abstract

This article reports a case study where the data was collected at one university in the United States. It shows the benefits of using digital videos in intermediate-level Japanese language course curriculum so that learners can develop a higher level of proficiency. Since advanced-level speakers, according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages guidelines, must possess the ability to narrate a story and describe a process, the use of digital videos helps learners' cognitive development involving changes and transitions (by shaping and reshaping cognition through practice describing process involving changes and transitions). The results of this case study revealed that integrating the digital videos into the curriculum led to an approximately 20% increase in students who reached the advanced-level when compared with the students from the previous two years. It is not easy for learners of the Japanese language to progress to the advanced level; however, this case study implicates that the use of digital videos can serve as a useful promotional medium by showing language models in high contextualization, conveying cultural aspects, and fostering cognitive development. (Contains 1 table.)

Introduction

Technological advances have impacted the foreign language learning environment in a variety of ways. For example, benefiting from digital-technology brings easily accessible video to the classroom, learners not only have target cultural experiences but also watch and listen to native speakers' talk that is made comprehensible for them. In this way, technology increases learners' motivation to bring their proficiency up to higher levels. Ultimately, technology integrated into curricula serves to mediate cognition and transform thought through "languaging," which refers to "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006). According to Swain, "languaging is a process which creates a visible or audible product about which one can language further." As such, digital video not only offers a unique window into a language and its community of speakers, but also serves as a means of developing language learners' cognitive abilities together with their language proficiency levels by providing highly contextualized input. This article will show one example of how, in order to enable students' language proficiency to progress to the advanced level, digital videos were integrated into the curriculum using a textbook entitled "An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese" (Miura & McGloin, 1994). This textbook was copyrighted more than a decade ago but was revised in 2008 (The textbook title remained the same) and is still widely used.

Development of Advanced -Level Proficiency

It is often observed that students cannot move beyond the intermediate-level of proficiency without participating in intensive programs or study abroad experiences after

completing their undergraduate-level Japanese language course sequence. Indeed, based on *Foreign Service Institute* data, achieving intermediate-low to intermediate-mid proficiency in Japanese requires learners with an average or superior aptitude to complete 480 hours of instruction (as cited in Rifkin, 2003).

According to the guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) (1999), advanced-level speakers must possess the ability to narrate stories and describe processes in major time frames in paragraph-length discourse. From the perspective of curriculum and material development, it is beneficial to integrate digital videos into the intermediate-level language courses for the following reasons. First, digital videos can easily be edited or dubbed (by inserting different narrations), depending on students' levels and needs. This allows intermediate-level learners who are not proficient enough to comprehend authentic materials, to have access to the rich learning resources of linguistics features and cultural aspects in context. Second, learners can be provided opportunities to develop critical thinking abilities through viewing digital videos which show the learners changes and transitions in highly contextualized processes. The use of digital videos with well-planned activities helps learners' cognitive development by shaping and reshaping cognition through practicing describing processes involving changes and transitions, and it could effectively bring the learners' proficiency to the advanced level.

Lesson Plan: Integration of Digital Videos

This lesson integrating digital video consisted of eight segments (see Table 1). The lesson's four goals were (a) to demonstrate deep cultural understanding of sushi and sushi shops,

Table 1. *Segments of Digital Video*

Segment 1	<u>Introduction</u> Introduction of the settings; the name of the restaurant, where it is located.
Segment 2	<u>Dialogue between Customer and Sushi Chef: Name of fish</u> Dialogue between the chef and customer discussing different kinds of fish and ordering a dish.
Segment 3	<u>Description of Process 1: Sushi rice</u> How to make sushi rice. Quick narration of the ingredients and how the sushi rice is made.
Segment 4	<u>Description of Process 2: Sushi rolls</u> Step by step of procedures for making sushi rolls (<i>maki-zushi</i>).
Segment 5	<u>Description of Process 3: Hand-shaped sushi</u> Making hand-shaped sushi (<i>nigiri-zushi</i>). Description of chef's actions such as cutting fish and making rice balls.
Segment 6	<u>Custom 1: Eating</u> Eating sushi.
Segment 7	<u>Custom 2: After eating</u> Finishing eating sushi and asking for tea and the check.
Segment 8	<u>Interview: Popularity of sushi in the US</u> Interview with an employee asking her opinion on why sushi is becoming popular in the US.

(b) to learn vocabulary related to making and eating sushi so that students can have meaningful experiences when dining at a sushi shop, (c) to foster learners' critical thinking and analytical skills through discussing why sushi became popular in the US, and comparing Japanese food

with Western food, and (d) to develop the language ability to describe a process by watching sushi-making and listening to the narration.

As a previewing activity, a ten-minute video clip entitled “Nihon-no Katachi (The Japanese Tradition: How to Enjoy Sushi),” taken from Google Video, was shown at the end of the previous class to interest students in sushi and increase their motivation to learn about it. During digital video viewing, all eight segments in Table 1 were viewed, explained, and discussed separately. For each segment, the vocabulary was explained by the instructor, using a vocabulary list categorized by parts of speech and others related to sushi and eating customs in Japan. After viewing a segment, students were asked a few simple questions on a content focused worksheet to check their comprehension. After watching Segment 8, entitled “Dooshite Amerika-de Sushi-ni Ninki-ga Aru-to Omoimasuka (Why is Sushi popular in the US?),” a class discussion was conducted.

Student outcomes were observed during assessment processes. Students’ opinions about the popularity of sushi in the US and their abilities to describe a process were tested. In the conversation test, the following question was asked in the target language: “Why has the number of foreigners who eat sushi increased recently?” The students’ performance showed that they could express their opinions using a greater variety of words listed on the vocabulary sheet such as Meatarashii (original; novel; new) and Karorii-ga hikui (low calorie), compared to the previous year’s students. The second assessment was conducted as a part of the final exam. At that time, students were asked to describe how to cook another type of dish “Ten-don,” which will be discussed in the next section.

Further Development of Video Clips

Two more videos were developed so that the students could continue to practice describing a process while learning about another type of dish, “Donburi-mono (food served in a large bowl).” This dish was introduced in the conversation sections of the same chapter in which a conversation at a sushi restaurant was taught.

Although the speech in all of the segments of sushi video (described above) was scripted and dubbed after filming so that learners with lower-level language proficiency could easily comprehend, the segments of Oyako-don video included a cook’s unscripted speech and instructor narrations. Using the narrations as a model, students could practice describing how to make Oyako-don. However, only unscripted comments by a cook were included in the Ten-don video; therefore, students needed to describe the whole cooking process using the vocabulary list on their own. For both of the videos, vocabulary lists and handouts containing information and questions regarding cooking procedures were distributed. While viewing, the students completed the handouts by describing how to cook the dishes. After viewing, the students described the entire cooking process. As mentioned in the previous section, students were asked to describe how to cook Ten-don during the conversation test as a formative assessment. In addition, ACTFL oral proficiency interview where the intermediate-mid or higher levels of students were tested on describing a process, was conducted at the end of academic year. Although the results were obtained within an academic institution at one university, approximately 20 more percent of students could reach the advanced level in the year when the digital videos were integrated into the curriculum, compared with the students for the previous two years.

Discussion

This curriculum had two main pedagogical benefits. First, digital videos with model narrations by the instructor clearly conveyed information. Students retained vocabulary better and practiced describing the whole cooking process by filling in worksheet blanks during the video. This activity which could develop organizational skills as well as the language ability helped to bring their proficiency to the advanced level. Second, digital video supplies a rich source for teaching culture by using images of real people who use the target language for daily communication in a rich context. Including a variety of segments in a video helped students demonstrate better understanding of the target culture.

The experience of integrating digital videos into the curriculum suggested that digital videos which can connect with students' background knowledge should be produced and selected so that students can better benefit from listening comprehension, learning new vocabulary, and enhancing cultural awareness. The tasks required by a curriculum utilizing this type of digital videos should enable students to attempt to reach their aiming proficiency levels, because advanced-level speakers, according to the ACTFL guidelines, are characterized by the ability to participate actively in conversations, and narrate and describe (in major time frames with good control of aspect with suitable accuracy and confidence) in connected discourses of paragraph length.

From the pedagogical perspective, two problems were identified in the curriculum-implemented digital videos. First, there was insufficient class time for integrating a variety of teaching materials and requiring complicated cognitive processes. To solve this problem, it is imperative for future lessons in this curriculum that class time should be used as efficiently as

possible. If allocated class time is tight and cannot be flexibly adjusted, distribution of handouts such as vocabulary lists beforehand would be necessary. The second problem was that more proficient and extroverted students tended to dominate over less proficient and introverted students. This kind of curriculum could promote more active participation of students; however, it is important for an instructor to shift the balance of student participation.

It is not easy for learners of Japanese as a foreign language to progress to the advanced level or higher without living in the target-language-speaking country. As shown above, however, developing and integrating digital videos into a foreign language class can more easily help to elicit discussion and creative speech, which would lead learners' proficiency to higher levels, because videos can serve as a promotional medium by showing language models in high contextualization, conveying cultural aspects to the audience, and fostering language learners' cognitive development.

References

- ACTFL Oral proficiency interview tester training manual*. (1999). Yonkers, NY: ACTFL, Inc.
- Miura, A., & McGloin, N. H. (1994). *Integrated approach to intermediate Japanese*. Tokyo, Japan: The Japan Times.
- Miura, A., & McGloin, N. H. (2008). *Integrated approach to intermediate Japanese (Rev.ed.)*. Tokyo, Japan: The Japan Times.
- Rifkin, B. (2003). Oral proficiency learning outcomes and curricular design. *Foreign Language Annals*, 36, 582-588.
- Swain, M. (2006), Languaging, agency and collaboration in advanced second language proficiency. In H. Byrnes (Ed.), *Advanced language learning: The contribution of Halliday and Vygotsky* (pp. 95-108). London: Continuum.